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### Volunteer adventure takes UM physical therapists to Chiapas

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## **NEWS RELEASE**

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This release is available electronically on INN (News Net).

Oct. 29, 1996

### **VOLUNTEER ADVENTURE TAKES UM PHYSICAL THERAPISTS TO CHIAPAS**

#### **MISSOULA —**

Imagine volunteering as a physical therapist in a place where people don't know what physical therapy is and don't speak English, where at times the only transportation is the back of a stock truck, where people live without electricity and there's no potable water, where day begins well before dawn to the cock's crow and donkey's bray.

Those are a few things Carrie Gajdosik, a physical therapy associate professor at The University of Montana—Missoula, dealt with for a month last spring as she traveled the dusty back roads of Chiapas, Mexico, offering her service and expertise. With her on this humanitarian mission was Cynthia DiFrancesco, a senior in physical therapy from Hamilton who also has a bachelor's degree in English from Montana State University in Bozeman.

It was an experience Gajdosik spent several years pulling together. And it was one that decided DiFrancesco's future career.

The two will give a slide presentation of their experiences Wednesday, Nov. 6, at UM. The program, sponsored by UM's Physical Therapy Club, will begin at 7 p.m. in the physical therapy department, located in the basement of McGill Hall.

Funded partially by a UM minigrant and working through two nonprofit organizations, Gajdosik and DiFrancesco made their way into some of Mexico's most rural areas to work mostly with children in villages and Guatemalan refugee camps.

As often as not, they conducted their "clinic" on the packed-dirt floor of a villager's home -- a rustic hut with uncovered openings for windows and doors.

"Sometimes there wasn't a clean place on the floor," DiFrancesco said, "so we used the bed, a wooden platform. Work conditions were so utterly different, you can't compare."

Accompanying them usually was a Mexican volunteer "health promoter," a relatively new entity in



the country's rural health care program. The health promoter was crucial to what the two were doing. This person, usually with just a grade school education and no medical training, would watch and learn as Gajdosik and DiFrancesco demonstrated physical therapy techniques.

One of the most common ailments they found was clubfoot, seldom seen in the United States because it's usually corrected by incrementally stretching and casting the foot muscles before a child is a year old. The cases Gajdosik and DiFrancesco saw were beyond help with such therapy, although the two could suggest exercises as preparation for surgery, should it ever become an option.

Because the villagers and refugees had no concept of specialized roles in health care, Gajdosik and DiFrancesco also were called upon to offer care and advice on many ailments unrelated to physical therapy, Gajdosik said. Those ranged from difficulty in sucking, chewing and swallowing to spina bifida to brain damage caused by what was commonly called "the fever."

Gajdosik's seven years' experience as a developmental specialist at the Western Montana Comprehensive Developmental Center in Missoula proved invaluable in such cases, she said. Equally helpful, in general, were her previous travels in developing countries.

"I was not afraid of the situation," she said. Many who go into these situations are coping with different living conditions and their fear of those conditions simultaneously, she said. For her, not being fluent in Spanish was the hardest part of the experience.

"I couldn't interact spontaneously," she said. "I was unable to make the child comfortable." DiFrancesco speaks Spanish fluently, but even she needed help in the refugee camps -- someone to translate from Spanish to Guatemalan.

Her interest and commitment heightened by the Chiapas mission, Gajdosik is now scouting contacts in India, where she hopes to volunteer at least a couple of weeks during her vacation there next summer.

DiFrancesco's future came into sharp focus as a result of the adventure in Chiapas.

"I didn't want to leave," she said. "My goal now is to work internationally as a physical therapist."

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